

HONORING DR. SALVATOR ALTCHER

Mr. DODD. Mr. President, I rise today to pay tribute to Dr. Salvator Altchek, the beloved “\$5 doctor” of Brooklyn, NY, who passed away last month at the age of 92. I ask unanimous consent to print in the RECORD the beautiful obituary commemorating the life of Dr. Altchek written by Douglas Martin of the New York Times.

Dr. Altchek was warmly known as “the \$5 doctor” because he spent virtually his entire 67-year career treating anyone who showed up at his basement office in a working class section of Brooklyn Heights, charging them little or nothing for his services.

Despite treating thousands of people, and delivering thousands of babies, most people never heard of Dr. Altchek. That’s because he sought neither fame nor fortune. His only goal in life was to help as many people as possible. In so doing, he touched the lives of so many individuals and so many families. He was truly an American treasure.

I leave it to the words of Douglas Martin’s obituary to tell the story of Dr. Salvator Altchek, whose lifetime of selfless devotion to helping strangers will continue to serve as an inspiration to us all. I urge all of my colleagues to read this special tribute to a very, very special American.

There being no objection, the article was ordered to be printed in the RECORD, as follows:

[From the New York Times, Sept. 15, 2002]

SALVATOR ALTCHER, “THE \$5 DOCTOR” OF
BROOKLYN, DIES AT 92
(By Douglas Martin)

Salvator Altchek, known for 67 years as the \$5 doctor to the melting pot of Brooklyn, especially the poorer residents of affluent Brooklyn Heights, died on Tuesday. He was 92.

He continued to work until two months ago, but gave up house calls five years ago. He delivered thousands of babies and generally attended to the health needs of anyone who showed up at his basement office in the Joralemon Street row house in the Heights where he lived, charging \$5 or \$10 when he charged at all. The office, with its faded wallpaper of Parisian scenes, cracked leather furniture and antique medical devices, had not changed much since Jimmy Rios got his first penicillin shot there half a century ago.

“You could walk into his office and he could tell you what you had before you sat down,” Mr. Rios said.

Dr. Altchek often made his house calls on foot, carrying his black medical bag. He treated the poorest people, angering his wife by sending one away with his own winter coat. He welcomed longshoremen and lawyers, store owners and streetwalkers. One patient insisted on always paying him \$100 to make up for some of those who could not pay at all.

A few years ago, a homeless man knocked on his door and said he had walked all the way from Long Island to have a wounded finger treated. He had last seen the doctor as a toddler growing up in Brooklyn Heights more than 50 years before.

The doctor sometimes greeted 70-year-olds he had delivered. While it is unclear whether

he was the oldest and longest-working physician in the city, he was very likely the only one nicknamed “the \$5 doctor.” When his practice opened, he treated Arab-Americans around Atlantic Avenue and was the favored doctor of the Puerto Ricans who began to live in the row houses of Columbia Place, near the waterfront, in the 1930’s.

“He wasn’t out to make money; he was out to help people,” said Sara Mercado, whose daughter was delivered by Dr. Altchek. People in her family were among his first patients.

Ramon Colon, in his book about a Puerto Rican leader, “Carlos Tapia: A Puerto Rican Hero in New York” (Vantage, 1976), wrote:

“He is a physician who treated the poor and never asked for money from the oppressed community. They paid when they had it, and he treated them as though they were Park Avenue residents.”

Salvator Altchek was born in 1910 in Salonika, then part of the Turkish Ottoman Empire, now part of Greece. As Sephardic Jews, with roots long ago in Spain, the Altcheks spoke Ladino, a form of Spanish spoken by Sephardim that dates back to the 15th century.

The family became part of New York’s ethnic rainbow when his father, David, who spoke a half-dozen additional languages, brought the family to the city in 1914, in steerage. They lived at first on the Lower East Side, but moved to Spanish Harlem, where they felt more comfortable with Spanish-speaking people.

Dr. Altchek’s father took a variety of jobs, including selling fudge at Macy’s. But as a professional fermentation engineer, his main income, even during Prohibition, came from the ouzo, cherry brandy and wine he discreetly made and sold.

Salvator Altchek and his seven brothers and sisters made deliveries. In a favorite family story, he delivered wine to a buyer who admired it and speculated on the vintage.

“That’s fresh,” the boy chirped. “He just made it.”

He graduated from Columbia and attended New York Medical College, then in Manhattan and now in Westchester County. Emanuel Altchek, the oldest brother and the first of three of the brothers to graduate from medical school, paid Salvator’s tuition. Salvator, in turn, paid his brother Victor’s way.

Salvator Altchek worked in Prospect Heights Hospital, long since closed. But he decided that he wanted his own practice. For more than half a century, he began his workday at 8 a.m., took a half-hour off for dinner at 5 p.m. and closed the office door at 8. He then made house calls, often until midnight.

He knew everyone, and everyone knew him. Walking down a street, he would recognize gay lovers, Mafia soldiers and prominent lawyers. He often greeted someone by grabbing his hand and taking his pulse. His passion for preventive medicine surpassed his tact.

“Hello, dear, you’re looking well,” he would say to a patient. “You put on a little weight, didn’t you?”

When his wife, Blanche, died 32 years ago, he fell into a depression. His sister Stella Shapiro heard him advise a patient to find another doctor. But he gradually recovered by throwing himself into his work.

He never remarried and was especially proud of the tall linden tree in front of his house, which he dedicated to his wife. He built a bench around it that neighbors and strollers could use.

In addition to his brother Victor and sister Stella, both of Manhattan, he is survived by his daughters, Susan Aroldi of Saddle River, N.J., and Phyllis Sanguinetti of Buenos

Aires; four grandchildren; and five great-grandchildren.

Dr. Altchek was a constant personality in a neighborhood that changed many times, from proper society enclave to wartime boardinghouse district to artistic bohemia to haven for young professionals. When Truman Capote, then a Brooklyn Heights resident, invited him to his famed Black and White Ball in 1966, the doctor did not know who Capote was until he finally recalled his face from the steam bath of the St. George Hotel, Caren Pauley, a niece, said.

Once when he was held up at gunpoint, Dr. Altchek said he could not give the would-be robber any money because he had a date with an attractive woman, Ms. Pauley recalled. The robber, recognizing him, reached into his pocket and gave him \$10.

Dr. Ozgun Tasdemir, a physician who immigrated from Turkey, made Turkish candy for him, having noticed his cache of Turkish desserts in the office refrigerator. She said he brought the latest literature on her ailment to share with her.

Dr. Altchek stopped making house calls only when he could no longer walk up steps easily. He did not renew his malpractice insurance when it expired in July. He began calling up other doctors, asking them to take his patients who had no insurance.

His brother Victor said that Dr. Altchek had correctly diagnosed the abdominal condition that led to his own death. His last spoken thought was to remember that he owed a patient a medical report.

NATIONAL 4-H YOUTH DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM WEEK

Mr. DEWINE. Mr. President, I rise today, along with my friend and colleague from Oklahoma, Senator INHOFE, to pay tribute to 4-H, one of the strongest youth organizations in the country. I am proud to be a cosponsor of the legislation that Senator INHOFE introduced recently to designate October 6, 2002, through October 12, 2002, as “National 4-H Youth Development Program Week.”

4-H began in Clark County, OH. Just minutes away from where I grew up. In 1902, a century ago this year, A.B. Graham established a “Boys’ and Girls’ Agricultural Club.” There were approximately 85 children who attended that first meeting in the basement of the Clark County Courthouse in Springfield, OH. This was the start of what would be called a “4-H Club” within a few years. The first projects included food preservation, gardening and beginning agriculture.

4-H has grown from its 85 original members to approximately 300,000 in Ohio and over 6.8 million nationwide. One out of every six people in Ohio has been or is currently involved with 4-H youth development programs either as a member, parent, volunteer, or donor. The project selection has also grown from the original three to over 200. A sampling of today’s projects include health, family life, photography, aerospace science, bicycles, natural resources, safety, horticulture and nutrition.

We need organizations, like 4-H, to help guide our next generation of agriculturists, teachers, and even elected officials toward a better tomorrow. I